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ABSTRACT

Deliberately writing badly can be an effective way to learn to write better because knowing when writing is bad is an essential element in knowing when it's good. There are distinct advantages to encouraging students to learn the rules by breaking them. Deliberately doing it wrong removes the threat of failure. Students are playing; they are having fun. Some particular examples of this teaching approach are as follows. One, after reviewing common grammatical problems that have come up in students' writing, assign students to turn in a page of writing that breaks as many of these rules as possible. Two, after illustrating what makes a good opening for an article, give students a list of 10 article ideas and have them write bad leads for them. Three, give out a list of wordy phrases and cliches and assign each student to write a coherent paragraph that uses as many of the phrases from the list as possible. Four, in teaching typography in basic desktop publishing, give students a list of short quotations, sayings, product names, value words, etc., and assign them to produce a one-page poster with a typeface that is complete inappropriate. These and other exercises follow a similar structure: (1) learn the rules; (2) break the rules; (3) identify where someone else has broken the rules; (4) clarify what the rules are; (5) correct someone else's broken rules; and (6) produce an original example that fulfills the rules. (TB)

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(The Teaching Strategies Sharing Project)

THE DO IT WRONG APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING

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Deliberately writing badly can be an effective way to learn to write better, because knowing when it's bad is an essential element in knowing when it's good.

Most of us use negative examples intuitively in our teaching ("Don't do it that way, do it this way.") and the concept is certainly not new. The poet William Blake pegged the idea nearly 200 years ago in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough."

I sometimes make negative examples an important focus of the class. There are distinct advantages to encouraging students to learn the rules by breaking them. Deliberately doing it wrong removes the threat of failure. Students who are breaking the rules on purpose are not doing their best and failing to meet a standard; instead, they are playing. It's fun--which is something I especially like about this approach: It makes class safer and livelier. Finally, this method, as I use it, helps

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train students to edit their own work and the work of others. They learn, in a playful way rather than punitive way, to spot bad writing and correct it.

There are also psychological advantages to this approach. Many students resist "being taught." Some students revolt outright. Some resist passively. Some quietly subvert you in class. Others subvert themselves by failing at things they could perfectly well do. For many students, especially the resistors, "doing it wrong" has a liberating effect. After all, it's something anyone can do well. This approach seems to activate some capricious side of the self and gives it a job and a voice: producing negative examples for the class to enjoy and learn from. And when that capricious voice comes out, along with it comes some of the creative energy that is so often locked behind the student's fear of making a mistake. This approach is a good antidote to timid writing and an enjoyable way to learn how to do it right.

Here are some ways to teach writing through the Do It Wrong approach. These exercises are taken from courses I teach in magazine writing; I hope they will stimulate you to design exercises for your own courses.

The Worst Grammar

After reviewing common grammatical problems that have come up in students' writing, assign students to turn in a page of writing that breaks as many grammatical rules as possible. Swap papers, edit in class, and celebrate the most outrageous examples in good humor. As you discuss these, have students fix them and think up other correct examples.

As the class progresses, nurture any sign of the spark, silly humor, and puckish vitality that usually come with "being bad." See how much of that energy you can transfer over into the usual activities of the class. Observe carefully at what point the class starts to lose that creative freedom and whether it then reverts to a more grim and less enjoyable method of "learning."

Terrible Leads

After illustrating what makes a good opening for an article, give students a list of ten article ideas, but, instead of assigning them to write good leads for each article, have them write the worst leads they possibly can.

When these come in, swap them among students and have each student critique the leads, identifying and celebrating everything done wrong. (Take a vote and give a silly prize to the student who wrote the worst lead.) Discuss the bad leads and

what was bad about them. See if you can make some of them even worse. Students will discover that this kind of deliberately bad writing is very different from sloppy writing. These exercises produce writing that tends to be intelligent, cunning, and creative in its badness, and not just dull or inadvertent.

Then have students, in class, write good leads for several of the same 10 articles ideas. Discuss what was good about these and assign them to complete the rest for homework. Compare the results with what you usually get when you just assign them to write leads.

Maximum Wordiness and Deliberate Cliches

In editing class, I give out a list of "wordy phrases and cliches" and assign each student to write a coherent paragraph that uses as many as possible of the phrases from the list. What we find is that wordy, cliche-ridden writing sounds like a bad speech or sermon! When read silently, the wordiness is disruptive. When read emphatically by the author, sometimes the wordiness sounds like impassioned oral discourse, rather than like poor writing. We then get to discuss some differences between the spoken and the written and how editing repeatedly translates wordy, rambling oral speech into simple, clear, brief, tightly-organized written text.

The Incomprehensible Flyer

When they are learning basic desktop publishing, I give everyone the text for a simple notice of a meeting and ask them to set it on a page in a way that will not work as a flyer. Students then choose unreadable fonts, use tiny type, space things in incomprehensible ways, overlay a clutter of graphics, etc., till the flyer is unreadable. Or they leave something important off. We then work backwards from the "bad" examples and have students redesign them into something that works, and works well.

Inappropriate Fonts

In teaching typography in basic desktop publishing, I give students a list of short quotations, sayings, product names, value words, etc., and assign them to produce a one-page poster with that text set with a typeface that is utterly inappropriate--preferably a typeface whose visual message contradicts the verbal message. (The results are delightful: A collection notice set in Ransom Note. "LOVE" set in a frantic, jarring, postmodern clutter.) Students see the expressive "tones" of the typefaces at once and can point out how they are inappropriate. While discussing the often-hilarious results, we slip into a discussion of what makes a company logo effective, or what effect magazine designers achieve by using certain

typefaces. We discuss what fonts would be appropriate, change some examples into those fonts, and discuss the results.

Class Clowning

Occasionally there is a disruptive class clown or a class given to disruptive clowning. When this happens, I sometimes set aside a five- or ten-minute period each week dedicated to humor, on the theory that one concentrated period of organized disruption is better than sporadic disruption throughout the week. A student committee is elected to fill this time. The class evaluates each session, and "extra points" (which don't count in the grade, of course) are given for skits that show insight into my teaching methods and personal foibles. (This is not for teachers who are faint of heart.)

The Worst Possible Article

Early in a course on magazine writing, I like to give students a criteria checklist that identifies the elements of good magazine writing. The checklist provides a perfect vehicle for purposely breaking the rules. Using the principle of "do it wrong," I assign students to violate each of the criteria for a good article: Write a short article that is spectacularly bad in every category:

% focus of topic

% title, subtitle, and opening

% match to audience and magazine

% type of article and execution

% research and use of factual detail

% use of techniques from fiction (anecdote, narrative, quotation, characterization, description, humor, and emotional writing)

% organization and development of the body

% paragraph development

% ending

% style (sentence variety, word choice, tone, conciseness, level of usage, consistency)

% mechanics of the manuscript

If you use a similar checklist, it will serve as a guide for Do It Wrong exercises. While doing each thing badly, students are forced to focus on the criteria for a good article. They produce excellent examples of "how not to do it," they use their imaginations, and they usually enjoy it.

When the "bad" articles come in, have them swap papers and identify as many elements of bad writing as they can. Discuss examples of each. In the discussion, ask students to find ways to correct as many of these as we have time for. When there is time, pick 5 papers with particularly brilliant failures and ask 5 groups to try to design plans for fixing them.

Then see if you can get students to plan and write good, interesting articles that retain the verve and fun of the exercise of writing badly.

As a followup, assign them to read local publications and bring in examples of published articles that unintentionally "do it wrong" in one of the categories listed above. Offer special credit to anyone who can find an article from a national magazine that flubs one of the criteria for a good article.

The Awful Two-Page Spread

In magazine courses, writing takes on an external physical reality that it rarely has in other writing courses. Nobody writes magazine manuscripts for fun; they write for publication. Students write better when they begin to realize that a successful article does not remain as words on typing paper: It becomes a magazine layout consisting of body type, headline type, illustrations, and graphic elements. The Do It Wrong approach can help students learn to visualize published articles.

After you have discussed the principles of design and analyzed several 2-page magazine layouts, assign each student to design a 2-page magazine spread that violates as many as possible of the rules of good design. On a separate page, have each student turn in an analysis of the rules violated.

Swap layouts among students with this assignment: Have students tell what is wrong with this layout, and fix it as well as they can, identifying what they were unable to fix. Then have them produce new, well-designed layouts for the same article--layouts that makes good use of the design principles violated in the "bad" layout."

If you can find and bring in published examples of bad layout, you'll find your students primed to critique them. (It's fairly easy, for example, to find layouts with unreadable type against a muddled background.)

Rules for Breaking the Rules

Many aspects of the teaching of writing lend themselves to the Do It Wrong approach. You could use it in teaching paragraph development, consistency, sensitivity to the reader, writing titles, focusing topics, organizing an article, conducting an interview, and others.

>From the examples above, you can see how easy it is to invent your own exercises in Doing It Wrong. But wait: There are even rules for breaking the rules. Here are some guidelines:

* Be clear about which rules you want broken.

* Use the techniques of brainstorming: Tease out as many violations as you can, the wilder the better, and withhold analysis or critique until you have a good pile to work with.

* Try to keep the exercise light, non-threatening, and funny--yet also keep students on task: This IS part of something important. They will be tempted to get off the subject.

* Structure the exercise so that each student gets to:

1. learn (or discover) the rules

2. break the rules

3. identify where someone else broke the rules

4. clarify what the rules are

5. correct someone else's broken rules

6. produce an original example that fulfills the rules.

All the steps are important. Don't leave the exercise till students have returned to the rules and used them well. Ali cites research to support the idea that you need at least as many "positive" examples as "negative" ones. I would rephrase that: The goal is to transfer to the positive examples the kind of

creativity and energy students can generate by "being bad." Most discussions of teaching also recommend that you start with a positive example (such as, "Here's an example of a good way to open an article"). But if you use negative examples the way I describe--as a playful method for actively discovering and applying the principles of writing well--you will find that doing it wrong works, even if that's the first step you assign.

Note: These exercises are spice for a course whose main content is traditional writing instruction. Naturally, you would not use them all in a single course.

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